

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Are we FREEthinkers? (or just crabby intolerant atheists)

We've gotten some feedback lately from new readers of the Red River Rationalist, saying something like:

"I agree that religion should be kept strictly separate from government, and I am not an active member of any organized religion. But you seem to be spending all of your time making fun of the Bible & Christianity. As Freethinkers, shouldn't you be more tolerant of others' beliefs?"

Freethinkers have come to their position through several routes. Some grew up in an organized religious tradition and later rejected it. Others, myself included, never had any strong religious beliefs.

Looking back, up until about 15 years ago, I wouldn't have called myself an atheist. That was a term for activists, like Madalyn Murray O'Hair. I would have said that atheists were making a big deal about something that wasn't very important. I was certain that few adults really believed in their religion. They surely had outgrown that, about the same time that they had stopped believing in the Tooth Fairy and the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

I thought that organized religion was mainly a social activity, a way of having a group of people to visit with on Sundays, and to have someone to officiate at ceremonies like weddings and funerals.

But that was before it became obvious to me that there are some very important people in American politics and society who truly do believe. They are certain that if America would only outlaw abortion, homosexuality and the teaching of evolution, make everyone say Merry Christmas instead of Happy Holidays and burn all of the Harry Potter books, then everything would be perfect. America would never again be subject to hurricanes, tornadoes or earthquakes.

They believe that America is their God's chosen country. America can dictate to the rest of the world, because their God is on our side. Science is evil; only a literal reading of the Bible is necessary to find the answers to all questions.

Those people frighten me, not because of their religion, but because they are leading the world down a path to catastrophe.

But I have hope. I still think that many, probably the majority, of American Christians don't really believe in their religion. They are scared to admit that, partly because of social pressure. (What do you mean, the Emperor has no clothes?) Partly because Christianity, like most organized religions, fosters a sense of terror that an awful fate is in store for nonbelievers. Faith, i.e. unquestioning belief in the impossible, is a requirement. So they pretend to believe. They lie, even to themselves.

In the Red River Rationalist, we have tried to help those folks realize that they are not alone in their skepticism. They can start looking at their faith with a critical eye and laugh at the contradictions and

absurdities.

Maybe we're being too strident, frightening people away instead of welcoming them. Fears that people learn as children are very hard to ignore. And as someone who has never believed in a religion, I tend to forget that most people have those programmed reactions. I need to be reminded to tone it down sometimes.

But in response to the first question, I'm not crabby, I'm optimistic that America will come out of this fundamentalist mire quite soon. I'm intolerant of those who are trying to destroy modern civilization in the name of God, but other than that I am tolerant. And yes, I am proudly, an atheist.

As they say on public radio, opinions expressed here are solely those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rest of the Red River Freethinkers!

- Carol Sawicki

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Editor's Note: Several readers pointed out that non-believers are subject to the loudest voices of intolerance of any minority in our country. Latest polls show (depending on which poll you read) that the non-religious make up from 11% to 17% of our population. This is comparable to the percentage of several other minorities, including African Americans, Jewish Americans, and homosexuals. Yet all these other groups have gained a certain degree of acceptance -- one could identify with them and still be elected to public office. Not so for anyone who frankly announced they were non-religious. CC

Pledge of Allegiance

(1924 - 1954)

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation,
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all*

What the Boxelder Bugs Taught me of Godliness

This spring I was overrun by boxelder bugs. While purging my home of these innocuous creatures I was given a fascinating theological insight. I realized that I am God. Oh, I know I never created the universe or world, but then there's serious doubt about your god's part in that as well. And, after all, it isn't so important that any god be everything he's believed to be. What's important is that the believers

believe. And because of that belief they conduct themselves in interesting though illogical ways.

When I realized how many boxelder bugs there were in my house I knew I couldn't destroy them all. So my relationship with them began as a sort of a loose pact. A covenant, if you will. Here's how it worked. If I didn't see them I wouldn't go looking for them. If I saw one or two, sort of minding their own business, I let them live. If I saw a hoard of them, I'd pick them like so many berries and ceremoniously send their tiny souls to hell, or flush them down the toilet, whichever came first.

After operating under this dispensation for a time, and watching them cringe as I would pick them up by their little antennae, it seemed as though I were hearing some sort of strange chatter inside my head. After listening intently and analytically for a long time I realized I was reading the minds of these strange little creatures. It became obvious they were offering up little silent prayers to me, their god. Once I began to understand this, I realized that, with practice, I could read all their minds at the same time. Now this may seem idiotic that one could read six billion minds at the same time, but what immediately struck me as idiotic is that any god would even want to do that.

Well here's the thing about god stuff that mere mortals don't understand. It's a high. You pry into the private thoughts and affairs of billions and billions of bugs because it gives you a real sense of importance. It does wonders for your self esteem. Of course you can't grant them their wishes. You can't give them health or wealth or good luck at bingo. But they think you can! You can't save their children from the grinding heel of fate. But they think you can! Your powers are limited only by their gullibility and imaginations.

Now listen. Do you think I care anything about their sex life, their morals, their beliefs, their selfishness, their individuality? Do you think I want to have a huge mansion in the sky that I would be responsible to maintain for billions of faithful bug souls for all eternity? Christ! I may have delusions of grandeur, but I'm not a flamin' idiot.

I care nothing of their fate, nothing of their notions of sin or repentance, nothing of their spirituality, their bible studies, their prayer meetings. They might believe I created them in my own image and sent one of them to be their savior or their prophet, but my relationship with them is far more pragmatic than that. If you can find their little bitty ark of the covenant and look inside you will see a pact, carved in stone, if you will, that basically promises them this: "Shut up. Stay out of sight. I'll let you live."

If they would just leave off with all that biggetty buggety incessant chatter and stay the hell out of my field of vision I could let them live in their bountiful bower forever I suppose. But to the extent I have read their minds and tracked their actions I have come to realize they serve no useful purpose at all. Birds won't eat them. They are not pretty to look upon. They swarm in masses like so many *homo sapiens* in a spending orgy at the mall. The world is never any better off for their having been here. And the little idiots trust me to the point where they pray "thy will not mine be done..."

Well, bad luck for them, because now they've gotten on my nerves with all their incessant prayer chattering. Now, whenever I hear prayer, I respond by grabbing a handful of the little zealots and hurling them into the toilet while pulling the flush lever with my other hand.

I say, "There you little sonsabitches! There's my will being done!" And as they swirl into eternal damnation I'm always impressed as to how much I am like the God of the Christians and Jews.

- Mikko Cowdery

OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

John Helgeland. *De-Mythologizing Scripture*. March 28, 2006 presentation to the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar at North Dakota State University.

Red River Freethinkers started SRLS in Spring 2000 and remains one of its sponsors. This informal seminar meets Tuesdays at noon on the North Dakota State University campus through the school year and solicits presentations of all kinds and views with the general intent of examining science and religion, pseudoscience and pseudoreligion, and the specific intent of encouraging discussion. Hence our standard rule: the speaker is allowed 40 minutes without interruption followed by 20 minutes of interrogation. The seminar has been unusually successful over this past semester, which I measure by the fact that every meeting, although officially ending promptly at 1:00 pm, has had discussions continuing for an hour, even an hour and a half, more.

John Helgeland is Professor of History and Religious Studies at North Dakota State University and gave us the presentation named above about ways of thinking about the Bible and its significance. My background is too limited to present his talk adequately, and all I can do is to pass along what I got out of it. Perhaps that will be enough to give some idea of what goes on at SRLS, why the 20 allotted minutes of discussion were so vigorous that we will actually devote a couple of presentations next fall to following them up, and why the ensuing discussions went on for well over an hour.

First, everyone is aware, and in our culture probably all-too-aware, of the idea that the Bible is to be taken literally, that Scripture is to be interpreted literally. This Fundamentalist position is so prevalent that many people automatically equate it with Christianity. The very concept that other ways of viewing Scripture exist and are meaningful seems to have dropped out of public awareness. John's talk was a reminder that there are certainly other views held by Christians, and you can judge the meaningfulness for yourself. Please keep in mind that the following is a mixture of John's points and my notions of what they point to.

John said that Rudolf Bultmann (spelling?) said that Scripture needs to be understood historically, that translation necessarily involves two steps: (1) the rendering from Hebrew or Greek into English; (2) the conversion of an ancient worldview (or mode of expression) into a modern worldview (or mode of expression). Literal interpretation is based on rendering alone and, given a gap of 2000 years or more, has its own peculiar problems.

Old Testament Example: The structure of the Universe in Genesis 1. The language indicates a "firmament" separating the waters "above" from the "waters" below with the Earth in between, and this is entirely consistent with ancient views (and later Biblical descriptions) of a flat Earth sitting

upon (bottomless) waters below and a dome above with "waters" above it. Literally interpreted, this is now seen as nonsense. But it has a superficial resemblance to what is observed and, Bultmann says, it has a deep meaning for the culture of the time in that God is continually "separating" this from that, a divine power that is passed to the Jewish priesthood, who act to separate the sacred from the profane in daily life (see Leviticus for details of their duties).

New Testament Example: The Marriage at Cana (John 2:1-11). This is the turning of water into wine, the First Miracle of Jesus, the miracle initiating his Message. Helgeland asks, how are we to interpret this? Is it a literal act, and thus a nightmare for organic chemists? (And I cannot help but add, is it a literal act, and thus a cause for celebration for myself and other enthusiasts for the grape, that small but enduring Dionysian heresy within Christianity? And I would include our heretical cousins of the grain, except I have forgotten the Greek god of beer.) No, says Bultmann. It is symbolic, and is John's (the Apostolic writer, not the current Prof of H&RS) way of communicating that Jesus is initiating a renewal. In the Jewish cultural context of the first century or so, water represented "chaos" (a recurrent theme throughout Scripture, such as God "separating" waters from waters in Genesis and thus controlling chaos to Jesus walking on the water in the midst of a storm, demonstrating control in the midst of chaos). Chaos is death. Water is chaos. Wine is, well, a spirit causing happiness (things happen, anyway, so it's not death.) At the Cana wedding, the wine has run out, the Jews have no wine. Means: Their institutions are dead. Jesus provides wine, indeed, turns water into wine. Means: Jesus the reviver of, the infuser of life into, dead institutions. Bultmann says, this is what the Jews of the time heard, when listening to (Apostle) John's gospel.

John the Professor met his 40 minute time limit without interruption, and the inquisition began! We had a good fraction of Fundamentalists present, and the talk quite fulfilled their notion of heresy, although I certainly couldn't follow the criticisms raised.

Personally, I was intrigued by Prof. John's early definition of "myth", a term that would be used in everyday language with a strong connotation of "fiction" but in religious studies is used in the sense of a meaning "so true that it cannot be told in any other way than as a story or narrative". I certainly acknowledge the possibility of such expression, although I have not yet had the opportunity to think over the matter carefully (as best I can estimate, I believe I shall have reached an opportunity to examine it at the age of about 73-77, assuming no further intellectual distractions in the meantime). Indeed, it seems to me that Jesus typically expressed himself in this manner. What is a "parable" but a story expressing a truth best expressed as a story. I know that Jesus, upon demand, "explained" the parable. I also know that, according to Scripture, Jesus seems to have been silently raging at having to explain them, which would seem to indicate that he was at fault for having chosen common people (fishermen, financial advisors, etc.) as Apostles, which would seem omniscient, which is impossible, thus confirming that God in all His Persona (e.g. Jesus) support democracy, omniscience, which is impossible, thus confirming that God in all His Persona (e.g. Jesus) support democracy, to a degree. (Or a Sense of Humor to the same extent.)

Anyway, Prof. John's talk was followed by "vigorous discussion", as we put it in SRLS, when there are no pauses but nobody is screaming. And so it went for another hour and more. But quite definite lines were drawn within the those first 20 minutes, as the Fundamentalists were very quick to object that, if one departs from a literal interpretation, what will one say about the Resurrection? Is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ to be "merely" symbolic, not the genuine, honest-to-God Miracle of a genuine Jesus Body walking out of the Tomb, triumphing over Death and delivering theological afterthoughts to the Apostles, thereby laying the basis for genuine, honest-to-God Christianity as practiced by the genuine, honest-to-God Christians of the Fargo-Moorhead community? Well, Rudolph

Bultmann (foreigner?) thinks maybe so. So the Fargo-Moorhead community can either hang him (too late, I think) or explain why he's wrong. But how to show he is wrong? (If Bultmann died when I estimate he did, it's probably too late for a Letter to the Editor, even though the Fargo Forum does show a real interest in rehashing memories of the past and -- for some reason -- publishing stories from 40, or 50, or more years past from its own files, rather than current AP articles, especially irritating "news analyses".)

But I digress. Surely we can interpret God's Word, the Bible, literally? After all, if you can't trust God, who can you trust? And we know that the Bible is God's Word, because it tells us it is! as the Fundamentalists so clearly put it. Specifically, surely we can take the bedrock of the Christian Message, the literal Resurrection of Jesus Christ, literally? That was the question raised in those wonderful 20 minutes of guaranteed SRLS discussion, and as the discussion did not -- curiously enough -- resolve it, that will be the topic of at least two SRLS meetings in the Fall 2006 semester.

- Davis Cope

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(Ad)Verse

Which Came First -- the Chicken or the Egg?

(by Chuck Crane)

*Fundamentalists can't seem to agree
Just how it was Gays came to be;
They deny evolution
Could be a solution,
But balk at the thought that it might be I.D.*

The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

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Red River Freethinkers Calendar

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at the Fargo Unitarian Universalist Church at 121 9th Street South in Fargo.

For **21 May 2006**, we will continue trying the "Critical Discussion Group", a meeting format popular with many humanist and atheist groups. (This appears to be working fairly well. The Secretary notes that the 16 April meeting was so talkative that we never got around to selecting either the planned, or a suggested, topic.)

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"Never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and annoys the pig." I had seen this quoted in connection with the futility of explaining to a fundamentalist that creation science is an oxymoron (or, for that matter, what an oxymoron is).

BECOME A MEMBER!

Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send dues, name, address, phone number and e-mail address to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.

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